

## An Anabaptist theology opposing violence against women

### COMPILER'S COMMENTS

Violence against women, unfortunately, has not disappeared, even if fewer people are writing about it.

How do we develop a theology that can help us both to understand and work to end violence against women? It's a timely question for 2002. In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a flood of writing on this topic. This has slowed to a very slow trickle. If you've been following the book tables at women's conferences, you may have noticed this trend. Fifteen years ago, there were dozens of books on this topic—personal accounts of violence, the-

ological reflections, biblical studies. Look at the book tables now, and you'll see every type of spirituality described—the latest hot topic—but not a mention of violence against women.

Violence against women, unfortunately, has not disappeared, even if fewer people are writing about it. It's good to have writing about spirituality; I'm all for that! However, what we need is a spirituality and a theology that allows us to include all of our experiences as food for reflection. Violence is one of the experiences that many women face. The color of our skin, the amount of money we have at our disposal, the length of time we've been in a country, whether we are differently-abled; all these factors will determine how violence against women plays out in our lives. Our theology emerges from reflection on the stories of our lives.

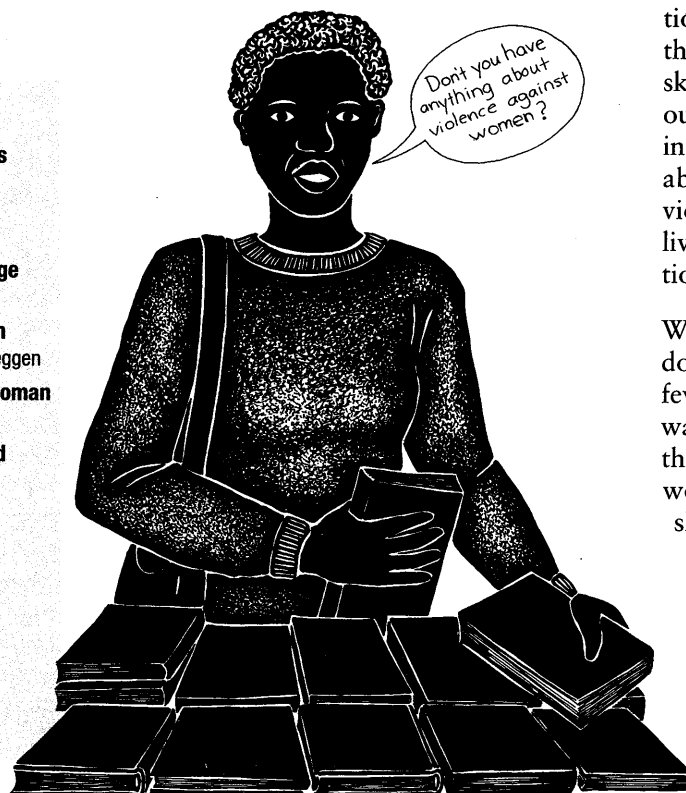
Why has the pace of reflection slowed down so much? Why are there so many fewer conferences on this topic? The way I see it, there's an exhaustion around this topic. In the 1980s and 1990s many women in Anabaptist churches risked sharing their stories of violence. For some it meant an end to shame and secrecy; they found telling their stories to be cathartic. Other people felt that their stories were not treated respectfully or that the change they hoped would take place

### FEATURES

- 3 Pacifism and women's resistance: Toward a new theology**  
by Beth Graybill
- 6 Forging a new language**  
by Carol Penner
- 8 The Role of the Church**  
by Carolyn Holderread Heggen
- 10 The Syrophenician woman**  
by Elizabeth Soto
- 11 A woman loved by God**
- 13 Too many stories**  
by Kathy Lawrence
- 14 Just Pray**

### IN EACH ISSUE

- 2 From the editor**
- 15 Bibliography**
- 15 News and verbs**
- 15 Women in leadership**



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as a result of the telling never materialized. Simply sharing stories was not enough to end the cycle of violence. People who risked their stories in the 1990s are more careful now. What's the point of sharing our pain in the church? How does it contribute to change?

I think that our theology should help us strategize more effectively. It should not only expose the sin of sexism but also

explore the avenues for eliminating violence against women. Those of us from peace church traditions have much to contribute to the larger ecumenical discussion.

What does it mean to be peaceful men and women in a society that so often tolerates violence? This issue of *Women's Concerns Report* offers reflections from women who are thinking and working to end violence against women.

—Carol Penner, compiler

## FROM THE editor

The November–December 2000 issue of *Women's Concerns Report* was the first to have my name printed as editor. Now two years later, with the inevitable transitions of life, this issue is the last. This is also the last issue before we start a year of celebrating our 30th anniversary. The first newsletter of what became *Women's Concerns Report* was printed in August 1973, entitled “Women in Church and Society.” Here are some quotes from that first issue:

- The Church's view of women, shaped by readings of Genesis and St. Paul, has usually failed to distinguish between the essence of faith and sociological factors influencing male editors and translators.
- Discrimination on the basis of sex can no longer be evaded, either morally or legally. The Church can choose to ignore the issue or provide responsible leadership and a more faithful response to the gospel.

The MCC Committees on Women's Concerns believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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- Attempts are being made to develop a language that is whole, positive, and inclusive.

Though we have developed some new language in the last 30 years, we are still in need of theological vocabulary to discuss such matters as violence against women. Discrimination and violence in the church and society is still rampant. In the United States, a woman is sexually assaulted or raped every two minutes. One out of every three women will be raped in her lifetime. Eighty-five percent of victims know their attacker.

Just yesterday I received an email from a pastor expressing concerns with this periodical, including the November–December 2000 issue on translation. He wrote, “I cannot agree with your direction and what I see to be undue promotion/agitation of women's rights.” There are many people in the church whose view of women has not changed and still don't understand the importance of talking about women's concerns. Thankfully that is not true of the women who wrote articles for this issue. They have seen friends and family members abused by loved ones, or experienced assault themselves. They recognize the connections between patriarchy and abuse. I am grateful for the authors in this issue, for my two years with MCC Women's Concerns, and for the work that this department has done for 30 years. But unfortunately, this issue proves that there is still much work to be done. A new language and a respect for the sanctity of women's lives, made in God's image, is yet to be realized. ♦

—Debra Gingerich, editor

# Toward a new theology

## Pacifism and women's resistance

**H**ow does peace theology look different when we put it in the context of violence against Anabaptist women?

What does it mean to do theological work experientially, in our bodies? I approach this issue from several vantage points: as MCC U.S. Women's Concerns director, a position that puts me in touch with survivors of sexual abuse in the wider Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches; as a scholar pursuing an advanced degree in Women's Studies; and as a rape survivor. I am not a theologian by training, but I have benefitted from the belief that we all do theology as we reflect on God's work in our lives.

As Carol Penner has noted in her doctoral dissertation entitled "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence Against Women" (Toronto School of Theology, 1999), traditional peace theology has not been helpful to victims of sexual abuse or assault. In fact, I believe it has often added a layer of guilt. Our tradition of nonresistance has helped contribute to violence against women by implicitly encouraging women to accept abuse as Christ-like suffering, rather than to resist. But Jesus taught us to pray, "Deliver us from evil," as I discuss later.

### Reconsiderations about violence against women

At the outset it seems important to say that a woman is not to blame for violence directed against her. Some of what passes for suggestions (nonviolent or otherwise) to women facing sexual abuse overlooks the fact that the United States is a rape-prone society, as compared to countries like Japan that are comparatively rape-free societies. The single most effective comment I heard in this regard came from the police detective who took my story hours after the rape. When I apologized for opening the door to my assailant that afternoon, the detective said, "Look, you didn't do anything wrong here. *He's* the one who committed a crime, not you." I, like many survivors, need to be reminded

to put the blame squarely on the perpetrator. We *should* live in a world where rape is unthinkable. The fact that it occurs is not a woman's fault.

In addition, we must recognize that women submit to violence for many understandable reasons: from shock/disbelief; being overwhelmed by a weapon, physical force or the power of a perpetrator's status or position (abuse of power); out of a desire to protect children or other family members, etc. Every woman should be commended, not blamed, for whatever she did or didn't do to get through the abuse or assault.

It's also important to note that when we think of pacifism and women's self-defense, we are usually assuming assault by a stranger (my situation, which represents less than 15 percent of all rapes). By contrast, the far more common incidents of battering, pastoral sexual abuse, date rape and child molestation within our Mennonite and BIC communities are committed by persons known to the girl or woman. Nonviolent resistance looks much different in situations where personal intimacy or trust is betrayed and women are caught off-guard by persons known to them. I fear that promoting nonviolent principles to women in such situations encourages acceptance rather than confrontation against these abuses. It may also drive women out of the church.

### Security

As I have struggled to make sense of my experience spiritually, I believe that what is needed is a new theological framework. Rather than the more typical sin-salvation-atonement framework, I would like to suggest a three-part survivor theology of security, resistance, and accompaniment.

Fundamentally, I believe that security comes from understanding ourselves to be daughters of God. In a 1997 publication entitled, *Piecework: A Women's Peace*

by Beth Graybill

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*Theology* (available from the MCC U.S. and Canada women's desks) the authors wrote, "Looking inside ourselves, there has to be a deep awareness that women are made in the image of God. We need to hold onto this especially in the face of experiences that might make us feel like objects." This understanding has been central to the mission of MCC Women's Concerns for 30 years. It becomes particularly important in situations of sexual violence or abuse, reminding us that even though experiences seek to objectify or demean us, we carry the divine feminine within.

The Bible is full of verses emphasizing the safety and protection of God. (Psalm 16:1: "Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.") Jesus' prayer for his disciples was, "protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15b). I cannot claim I thought of any of this during my assault. At the time I was terrified and I was terrified retrospectively, as elements of the scenario replayed itself in my mind. As an author in *Piecework* wrote, "It's very hard to feel spiritually connected when you are scared." Fear is a regular companion for many survivors of violence and abuse. Scriptures as fundamental as Psalm 23:4, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; your rod and your staff, they comfort me," can be hard verses for survivors to hold on to. Nevertheless, I have found it useful to claim God's promises of safety, especially in moments when I don't feel it.

## Resistance

Second, I want to claim resistance as an important theological construct. Evil is clearly against the will of God (Psalm 97:10: "The Lord loves those who hate evil." And Romans 12:9: "Hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good.") Sexual abuse and violence are evil acts, even when perpetrated by acquaintances or family members who are not evil themselves. In a lecture on abuse given a few years ago, James Newton Poling argued that the life and ministry of Jesus was one of resistance to evil. For Poling, Christ's resurrection was the ultimate example of this. To my mind, the clearest single instance of this is Jesus driving the money-changers out of the temple.

In the book *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way*, which was helpful to me as I tried to make sense of my own experience, theologian Walter Wink examines Bible verses that are key for pacifists. Wink argues that a better translation of Matt. 5: 39 ("Do not resist evil") would be: "Do not repay evil for evil," or, "Do not resist evil in kind," that is, by using lethal violence or armed resistance. Wink argues that violence is injurious or murderous harm; non-lethal force (such as Jesus cleansing the temple by driving out the animals and their sellers) is different. Applying this principle to a context of violence against women, anything short of lasting injury or death to one's attacker could constitute nonviolence. Some women buy mace; I took a self-defense course.

Some pacifists may take the position that part of one's commitment to non-violence is submitting to one's attacker as an example of loving one's enemies. I have respect for that position but I am not there. Sexual abuse and assault against women is a violation of bodily integrity that can have long-lasting consequences. I would never counsel someone to submit to that in the name of pacifism, whereas submitting in the face of overwhelming threat or force may be a rational choice that many women make in order to survive the experience.

From a womanist perspective, theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, in her book *The Black Christ*, coins the term, "spirituality of resistance" to describe the notion of actively opposing that which is oppressive. Brown calls Christians to develop a spirituality of resistance that "nurtures a connectedness to God" and roots us in the stories of other people in history who have resisted evil.

Given Anabaptist peace theology, I wonder what such a spirituality of resistance would look like for us? After my assault, I was commended for reacting non-violently (apparently fighting for the weapon, sliding it under the refrigerator, and running out the door was considered nonviolent.) My goal at the time was survival; political or pacifist correctness was beside the point. Whether or not fighting back and running away was nonviolent, it was certainly an act of resistance.

For me it was useful to have considered my response to the possibility of sexual assault before I had to face it. I am grateful to the Women's Studies literature I had read, most particularly a piece on rape avoidance strategies (*Stopping Rape: Successful Survival Strategies* by Pauline Bart and Patricia H. O'Brien). Based on interviews with several hundred women who'd been assaulted, Bart and O'Brien found that those women who had used one or more avoidance strategies were more likely to have avoided rape. These strategies were not limited to fighting back but included such actions as screaming, trying to talk to or reason with one's attacker, non-cooperation (passive resistance), stalling for time (until help arrives), making use of environmental intervention (a noise outside, a passerby), and running away.

I did all of those things. I also resisted my attacker by fighting for his knife. I doubt I would have done that had he been armed with a gun. We were both cut. He was later arrested and sentenced to seven years in jail based on DNA analysis of his blood left at the scene. I was lucky. Not every woman is.

One of the most helpful things said to me in a pastoral visit after the assault was in response to my question, "Where was God when this was happening?" My pastor replied, "I believe that God was with you in the struggle." I found it profoundly comforting to visualize a God with me, resisting my attacker. I derive tremendous comfort from the idea that Jesus was struggling with me during the assault, hating the evil as much as I did.

## Accompaniment

Finally, I would add a concept adapted from Latin American liberation theology, that of accompaniment. Guatemalan archbishop and martyr Oscar Romero spoke of the "pastoral de acompanamiento." Romero meant by this the pastoral work of accompanying Christians in their struggle for justice as a manifestation of Christ's presence with us. Mennonite Brethren writer Katie Funk Wiebe has written: "Where is God when we suffer? On the cross with us." This experience of

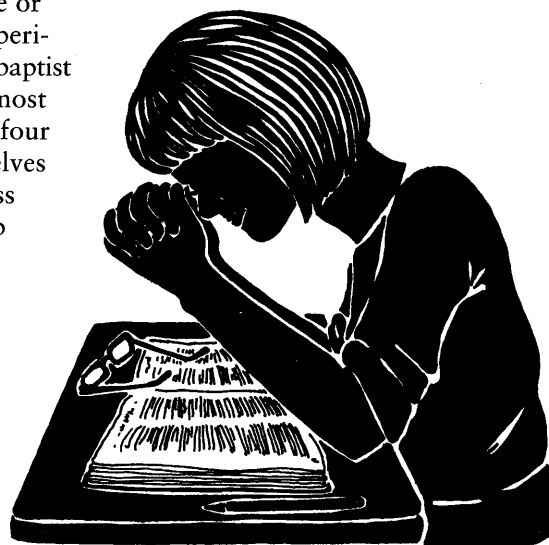
Jesus as co-sufferer fits my theology of accompaniment.

My accompaniment took many forms. Friends from church planned and led a house-cleansing service after the assault in my home. During my at-home anxiety in the early months after the assault, women came to be with me during my working days in front of the computer. Just the simple fact of someone else's presence made it possible for me to concentrate on my academic work. Other friends attended court hearings and supported me in dealings with the criminal justice system. Their concrete actions gave tangible evidence to me of the accompaniment of Jesus.

## No Easy Forgiveness

Finally, relating nonviolently can occur after the rape as well. I can choose not to hate my perpetrator, not to fear all men who resemble his physical characteristics. Survivors are often counseled to immediately forgive and forget (as was I) by well-meaning Christians who are uncomfortable with the violation and accompanying strong emotions. This can feel like being told, "Shut up; I don't want to hear about it," and it short-circuits the healing process. I believe that forgiveness is a therapeutic, long-term goal; forgetting is neither possible nor desirable.

I wish that these reflections could begin a long-overdue dialogue among Mennonite and BIC women about how peacemaking and violence against women inter-connect. I hope that someday it will become safe enough for more of us who have survived sexual abuse or assault to discuss these experiences in the context of Anabaptist peace theology, since, by most estimates, it effects one in four of us. Coming to see ourselves and each other as blameless for the experience can help us break the silence. ♦



# Forging a new language

by Carol Penner

**That morning was pivotal for me—a moment that you mark time from. It marked my beginning of thinking theologically about violence against women.**

I was working as a homemaker for Family and Children Services. Early one winter morning, I arrived at the home where I was working to find the door swinging open. The doorjamb was splintered and broken. I heard yelling and banging from the second floor. I ran inside, noting the disarray. The phone was pulled out of the wall. Someone had kicked or punched holes in the hallway walls. I followed the noise upstairs. I saw the woman I worked for huddled and shaking with fear in a corner of the bathroom. Her screaming ex-husband was standing menacingly over her. The two children were crying in the hallway. The little five-year-old girl ran to cling to her father's leg, "Daddy, Daddy, let's go shopping." She tried to distract him from his violence.

Seeing me, the woman yelled, "Call the police!" At this point he grabbed her and twisted her arm behind her back. He dragged her down the stairs to the kitchen and told her to put on her shoes and coat. She protested; she didn't want to go anywhere with him. He raised his fist and threatened to hit her. Holding his two-year-old son I said, in a very tiny voice, "Don't hit her." At this point, he whirled around and started cursing at me. Within a minute he'd dragged her out of the house. I ran with the children to the neighbors' and called the police.

The police arrived, and her next of kin came. Everyone was very worried because her ex-husband had threatened to kill her several times before. They told me to go home; they would take care of the children.

I felt totally numb. I managed to make it to some friends' apartment. When they opened the door I dissolved into tears. I lay in their apartment for hours crying and reliving what I had just seen.

Later that evening I found out that the woman got home safely. She managed to talk her ex-husband down. She pretended she wanted to be with him and suggested they go shopping together for the kids. They spent some time at the mall, and he took her home.

That morning was pivotal for me—a moment that I've marked time from. It marked my beginning of thinking theologically about violence against women. When that event happened, I had just graduated from Bible College, where I'd spent years studying peace theology. I knew all about just war theory and why Mennonites don't fight. I'd learned about conscientious objection and pacifism. But I had never heard about the violence I had just witnessed. It was never brought up as a context for peace.

Faced with this violence, I felt speechless. I felt betrayed by my faith and by the education I'd received. Why had no one talked about this type of violence? Why didn't I have ways to think faithfully about this? What did it mean to believe in nonviolence when I felt totally powerless to stop a 6'3", 200 pound man from beating his wife right in front of me?

I started rethinking what I'd learned in college and in church. When I thought about it, most of the stories I'd heard involved men: men having to decide not to enlist, men choosing not to carry weapons. Outside of the war context, the question usually was, "If a man broke into your house and was going to rape your wife and children, would you kill him to protect them?" Peacemaking as it was taught to me was trying to find the language to answer the question, "What does it mean to be a man and a Mennonite?" What was never talked about was, "What does it mean to be a woman and a Mennonite?" What do you do when the man you love tries to hurt you or a man in your family abuses you? How do you respond when you see a man hurting a woman? These questions just weren't on the radar screen.

And so that morning, I began a journey to find a new language—a new theological language to describe what I'd just seen, a language that would help me to speak to God about the pain I was witnessing. It took me many years to find the words and concepts I needed. I didn't find them in the

Mennonite world. I found them in the women's movement and in feminist theology. I took what I learned, and it helped me make sense of my life and the life of my family and friends. I realized that violence was insidious and deeply rooted. Violence was very close to home. Having a language for violence helped me to be able to recognize it and decide to work against it.

Using this language took courage. I remember the first sermon I preached about this topic. My knees shook as I took the pulpit. I didn't know if I would be allowed back after I used the words rape, incest and wife beating. At that time I did not think the words patriarchy or sexism were within the realm of possible language for the church.

Using this new language in the Mennonite church took practice. My doctoral thesis in theology was a place where I worked on that language. I looked at Mennonite concepts of suffering, obedience and forgiveness, and what those teachings meant for women in a patriarchal culture, where violence by men against women is a reality. I networked with other women and some men in the Mennonite church who were struggling with this new language. I worked for MCC, preaching and doing workshops to raise awareness about violence against women. Together, I saw people working slowly, incrementally, to change sexist attitudes about women that set the stage for violence.

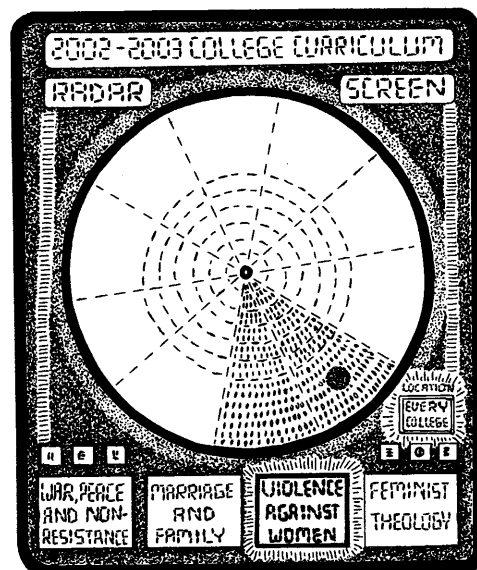
And yet two decades later, I'm not sure how much has changed. How active are churches in ending violence against women? I know very few churches that support women's shelters with their time or money. Very little writing is done on this subject. There are fewer workshops and conferences being offered about this subject than there were ten years ago.

I wonder about the woman graduating from a Mennonite college today who suddenly comes face to face with a woman being beaten by her partner. Would she have a language to speak about her experience? Is violence against women on the radar screen in colleges today? I spent some time checking out websites of Mennonite colleges and seminaries. I was pleased to see that gender issues are addressed in college curriculums. There

has been movement in the 20 years since I graduated. There are courses on feminist theology, or gender in war and peace. Some colleges do have courses that look at justice issues, in which they list sexism along with racism and other topics. Sometimes gender relations are listed as a topic in justice courses. Interestingly, a course on marriage and family in Christian theology looks at special dynamics created by adoption, childlessness, divorce and remarriage. Violence is not mentioned—an ironic omission within the peace church tradition.

But there is a peripheral tone to the courses on violence against women. Most colleges still have core courses on "War, Peace and Non-resistance" that talk primarily about war. This is important, of course! War is a horrible thing, and we need to know our own history and what we stand for as Anabaptists in terms of war. However, Canadian students are two generations removed from the last military conscription; Americans are one generation removed. In the North American context, only men were called to fight, and yet women are required to take the "War and Peace" courses as requirements for their degrees. Any courses that focus on violence against women are optional. My own experience on teaching courses like that leads me to the observation that enrollment is low and mostly women sign up. Ironically one third of the women in college classrooms have experienced violence against them because of their gender. Why can't we learn a language that helps us address the violence we are facing?

I would like to see a revamping of our theological teaching about nonviolence. We will always talk about war because war is a reality in our world. But the violence of sexism and racism is just as insidious in the lives of our college students and our churches and deserves equal billing with the violence of war. We need a language to speak for peace in the face of the violence in our lives.



**We will always talk about war, because war is a reality in our world. But the violence of sexism and racism is just as insidious in the lives of our college students and our churches and deserves equal billing with the violence of war.**

continued on page 8

I dream of being able to see this year's college student walk away from the scene of violence. She'll have been able to draw on strategies to survive the attack and help the other woman survive. She will cry. It will still be devastating. But she will have words. She'll be able to understand what type of violence this is. She'll be able to think of Bible stories that will give context for her feelings and emotions. She'll be

able to pray, remembering that her church has prayed for both victims and perpetrators of violence against women. She'll know that her church supports the local women's shelter. She'll be able to speak of her experience in her congregation. She'll be able to say, "This is sexism, this is violence against women. It's a sin and it's something that we as a church are working against." ♦

# The role of the Church

by Carolyn Holderread Heggen

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**The reality is that while we have preached and taught peace around the world, many of our homes have been places of violence and abuse. There is a great chasm between our formal theology and the reality of how we live together.**

Central to our self-image and public reputation as Mennonites and Brethren in Christ is a deep belief in pacifism and non-violence. We have gained a reputation as proponents of peace and prophets of justice. Many people, including my husband, have come to the Mennonite Church because of our admirable commitment to peace and justice. Our peace theology has been good news in a world tormented and exhausted by violence.

Unfortunately, it has become clear that our homes suffer levels of family violence and sexual abuse similar to those of non-Mennonite and non-Christian homes. The reality is that while we have preached and taught peace around the world, many of our homes have been places of violence and abuse. There is a great chasm between our formal theology and the reality of how we live together.

While there are cases of men battered and abused by women, the majority of family violence is committed by men against women, girls and boys. Violence against any other human being is unacceptable, and we must work to eradicate all intrafamilial violence. But if we want to eradicate family violence, we must address particularly the problem of men's violence against women, the reality in 95 percent of cases.

## Religious beliefs and family violence

In my professional work as a psychotherapist with Christian victims and abusers, I've tried to understand the relationship

between religious beliefs and family violence and abuse. I have identified seven beliefs frequently found in abusive environments. I'm not saying that any one of these beliefs is the cause of the abuse. Rather, these beliefs appear to interact with other factors that then provide an environment in which abuse may occur.

These teachings are:

1. It is God's will that men dominate and that women and children submit to men.
2. A result of the Fall is that woman is morally defective and less capable than man of making moral judgments. Therefore she should not trust her own moral judgment but should rely on men to determine right and wrong.
3. Suffering is a Christian virtue, and women, especially, have been chosen as God's "suffering servants."
4. Life in this world is difficult; we should not expect peace and justice until we reach heaven.
5. Christians should quickly forgive and reconcile with those who offend them.
6. Children should always obey their parents and elders.
7. Marriage must be preserved at all costs.

It is uncomfortable to examine the way in which some of our beliefs put women and children at risk. Nevertheless, the price of perpetuating a theology that can hurt some of our most vulnerable individuals is great.



## The Church's role

The Christian church has an admirable tradition of responding compassionately to the sick, the poor and many of those rejected by society. Nevertheless, the church has not been as faithful in its response to victims of family abuse and violence, even when the violence has taken place between members of our own congregations. It gives me hope to see some congregations beginning to address the issue of family violence. I have been a professional psychotherapist for many years and obviously believe the role of therapists in recovery from violence is important. I also know the important role of Spirit-filled congregational members who are willing to work to prevent family violence and who are willing to walk in loving compassion with those who have been abused.

Here are some specific steps congregations can take to help make our homes and institutions safer.

1. Make it known that all persons—the young and the old, the healthy and those with disabilities, males and females—are of equal value in God's eyes. We are all created by God and reflect God's divine image. Genesis 1:27 says, "And God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him, man and women he created them."
2. Teach church members that it is never appropriate for a believer to use violence to impose one's will on another. In the life of Jesus, we have a model of how it is possible to live in peace and love and in equality with one another. Jesus did not use his power nor his position to impose his will, rather he used it to heal and dignify the lowest and most rejected members of his society. Instead of using cultural models about how a man should act, we should hold up the example of Jesus for Christian men to imitate in their attitudes and behavior.
3. Communicate that when violence occurs in the home, it is not a private matter but rather the concern of the entire congregation. As the apostle Paul taught, we are all members of the same body. If one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers.

4. Dedicate more resources and put more emphasis on developing and supporting healthy interpersonal and family relationships. Starting from an early age, we must teach our young people that we are all created equal in God's eyes and as such, should treat one another with tenderness and respect. We should teach our members appropriate models of conflict resolution. We should help our new fathers and mothers learn ways of disciplining children that reflect Christ's spirit, do not crush the child's spirit and are effective.

5. Listen to victims' voices and learn from their stories. Whenever I speak on the theme of intra-family violence or sexual abuse, people share their personal stories with me. One woman said, "For many years I've carried with me the shame of what happened but I've never had anyone in the church give me permission to speak about my abuse. Thank you for listening, and for believing me."

6. Plan and carry out services that take into account victims' experiences and pain. Whenever I plan a worship service, I try to remember that it's likely that both victims and abusers will be present. Will the service touch the pain of both? Sometimes we include lamentations of biblical writers in our services. Various victims of family violence have written their own laments or prayers as part of their healing process. Why not use these writings, also sacred, during the service?

7. Examine religious teachings that could contribute to interpersonal violence. Earlier I shared some of the teachings that may be related to violence against women and children. Luke 4:18-19 tells us, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people." If our teachings aren't good news for the weakest and most vulnerable in our midst, they don't reflect our Lord's message and should be rejected.

**I also know the important role of Spirit-filled congregational members who are willing to work to prevent family violence and who are willing to walk in loving compassion with those who have been abused.**



continued on page 10

8. Congregations must commit themselves to the ministry of walking in love with suffering members. To love victims requires that we declare over and over again that it is not appropriate to use violence in our families nor to use children for our own sexual enjoyment. It requires us to tell the victim that she isn't guilty and that the shame she carries in her body and spirit is not her guilt but the guilt of

her abuser. It requires that we remind victims that they are much more than their wounds. They are precious children of God.

To love those in our midst who suffer and to be the face of Jesus requires that we declare the good news that in Christ's resurrection violence does not have the final word. ♦

# The Syrophoenician woman

by Elizabeth Soto

Elizabeth Soto is from Lancaster, Pennsylvania and a member of Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster. She, her husband, Frank, and their two daughters serve with MCC in Armenia, Colombia.

In re-reading Mark 7: 24–30 from a woman's perspective, we can see stories of families struggling together to bring salvation to their members. In many of Jesus' miracles we can see his intent to restore family unity: Jairus' daughter's healing, the widow's son's resurrection and the liberation of the daughter of the Syrophoenician woman. The story of the Syrophoenician woman presents the message of a double outcast, first for being a gentile and second for being a woman. Mark 7:24–30 presents a description of who this woman is, where she comes from and the urgency of her petition. This woman is an outsider ethnically and religiously. She is carrying the burden of her daughter's illness. Similar to Latin American women, she does whatever is possible for her child's health. She leaves her family/home, breaks societal male-female relation patterns, trespasses on religious barriers, and falls at the feet of Jesus. She is desperate because the well-being of a family member is at stake. Her own religious beliefs have not offered her a solution, so she goes to other places.

In Mark 7:24, Jesus goes to a house to search for privacy, "yet he could not keep his presence secret" (NIV). The church has kept its presence secret to abused children and

women, both to its own members and outsiders. Does the Church not know they are there? Or does it just not want to be bothered? Who is the woman in this Bible passage? She is the mother of an evil-possessed daughter. This small child did nothing to make this happen, but maybe it was what someone had done to her body. Perhaps someone had committed a sin against her. So this mother finally arrives and falls at Jesus' feet to beg for liberation and healing—not for herself, but for a small innocent child. How many women fall at the feet of the Church begging to be heard? They need their stories to be understood, but many are just afraid to speak out and afraid to be further blamed. What this mother wanted was for her daughter to be restored as a functioning member in her family, to be able to live her life fully. The woman fears for the future that will await her daughter, or the lack thereof. But where is the father of this child? He is not seen nor heard. Once again no male is present. It is a common woman's story in which we as the church can come to the rescue.

Jesus' humanity is seen in this story. We see Jesus the Jew who advocates first for his kind. We also see Jesus the man who is bothered by yet one more request, and this woman dares to interrupt his privacy with her request, a family's request. Mary Ann Tolbert from *The Women's Bible* commentary on the Gospel of Mark makes an interesting comparison between Jesus' response to Jairus and to this gentile woman. Tolbert places a greater weight on the gender difference and gives this



as the reason for the different treatment. Jesus' negative response is typical and expected of a Jewish man relating to a pagan woman. The sense of superiority over another ethnic group can be read in his response although many commentaries have interpreted it as the messianic call for the Jewish people. The use of the term "children" in contrast with the term "dogs" does sound insulting, even degrading in modern western culture. I notice that the connecting pronoun in "children's bread and toss it to their dogs" unites the children and the dogs as part of one same household. The clever response of this woman leaves Jesus with no other response than the miracle she is asking for. By rearranging Jesus' statement, she requests not bread but crumbs. She surely knows her place in a Jewish man's world, but she claims her right as part of God's household. Because she dares to approach a Jewish man on behalf of her family—an act questioned even by Jesus—she protects her family. She has perhaps taken over a man's responsibility. This humble woman exposes Jesus' own prejudicial response to her and claims her right as

a human being to her Creator. Not only does her faith help her out as many interpreters see this message, but the power of her words grants her the request. She dares to challenge the answer with a question to get her needs met. This woman teaches Jesus a lesson, one in which social convention and gender distinction should not get in the way of doing good for those in need because those in need do share our same humanity.

This healing liberation, like many of Jesus' miracles, has implications for social restoration. To liberate one member in the family brings peace of mind to all the family members. It restores harmony. The healing of one member can bring healing to the entire family. The ethnicity and gender of this woman contribute to her being treated as an outsider in the Jewish world. This is the condition of many abused women in how they are treated in our churches. Many Syrophoenician women in our churches bring their wounds to us for healing and liberation. As long as we continue to see it as their problem and not ours, we will deliver a handicapped Gospel. ♦

**How many women fall at the feel of the Church begging to be heard? They need their stories to be understood, but many are just afraid to speak out and afraid to be further blamed.**

**Note from the compiler: As I was compiling this issue, I asked several women to respond to the questions, "Can you think of an event or story that has motivated you to work against and think about violence against women? How has that story affected your theology as a Mennonite?" I suggested they respond to the question in the form of a letter, in order to keep the stories personal. Here are the letters I received:**

## A woman loved by God

Dear Carol,

My family was very active in the Mennonite church when I was growing up, but the teachings of nonviolence were not a very prominent part of our church teachings.

### Girl in family

My parents are first generation immigrants. As the youngest of seven children, I had the opportunity to observe my siblings growing up. At the dinner table, I learned

quickly that if one of my brothers or father wanted something from the fridge while eating, one of my sisters or I were expected to jump up to get it, without question or hesitation. None of my brothers were ever expected to do that. If one of my brothers or father made a comment or said something funny, it was much more funny or brilliant than if one of my sisters or mother had said the same thing. Often when we had company for dinner, my father would treat my mother's contributions to the con-

**The author chooses to remain anonymous.**



**These things modeled to me that being born female was simply not ideal. Often I wished I could have been born a boy so that my ideas and thoughts would be more important.**

versation as though they were stupid or unimportant. It was as though he was embarrassed about whom she was or what she was saying, maybe embarrassed about her thick accent.

These things taught me that being born female was simply not ideal. Often I wished I could have been born a boy so that my ideas and thoughts would be more important. Maybe then I would be heard and have the opportunity to be acknowledged as intelligent with something valuable to contribute.

Often at night, I would hear my parents argue, and I would cry myself to sleep with anxious knots in my stomach. I'd pray that they would stop, that they wouldn't hurt each other anymore and that they would fall in love again. When I was in high school, I realized that the disrespectful ways I was treating my mother were learned from observing the behavior in my home. I needed to make peace with my mother for the ways I acted toward her. I needed to make peace with the fact that I was a woman too.

Eventually, my parents changed how they related to each other. Perhaps it was a combination of empty nest syndrome, some tough health issues for my dad, and some honest soul searching and sincere work on his part. I'm not sure exactly what to attribute the change to, but they now relate to each other in a much more egalitarian way. They truly have become friends and healthy companions that enjoy each other and treat each other with dignity and respect. The knots in my gut are now gone.

## Young woman in church

Throughout my teenage years, I was very involved in church through music, youth executive committee, children's Sunday school teaching, and youth church services. After graduation from high school, I became a church member, and I was asked if I would let my name be listed for nomination to lead singing in front of the congregation. I agreed to be nominated, knowing that no other woman had ever led congregational singing in our church.

Soon after, I attended my first church membership meeting. When it came to the vote for the song leader positions, the man chairing the meeting read my name and said, "Who do you think you are? We can't let women lead singing in our church. The next thing you know, we'll have women preaching." I sat there stunned at what this guy was saying. I didn't say a word. I just watched as he carried on "theologizing" his position, wondering how he could know better than I or those who nominated me what God may have called me to do. I don't recall withdrawing my name as a nominee, but none of the meeting was conducted correctly. Somehow, the conversation was drawn to an end, with no further comment asked of me, and no platform given to process and discuss this fairly.

## Woman in college

A few years after this experience, I struggled with trying to find a sense of belonging in church. Many people had affirmed my gifts and if I was a man, there certainly would have been encouragement for me to pursue training for ministry in the church. Two voices were in conflict with each other. One was this sense that if I felt a call that had been affirmed by those in my faith community, this could be God's call for me. The other was that if this same faith community didn't allow me to use my gifts to lead because I was a woman, what place was there for me in the church?

One day an older woman in my church pulled me aside and said she saw great gifts in me for ministry and thought I should go to Bible College for further training. She told me that not all churches

believe that women should not be leaders, even many Mennonite churches had women who led singing, preached, and served as elders and deacons.

When I arrived at college, this struggle was still very real for me. There was only one woman professor and many of the men said they hadn't worked out their position on whether women should be in pastoral leadership or not. This was the early 1990s.

In my third year of college, a group of women held a conference on campus featuring women theologians. They also sponsored public lectures, with biblical teaching on egalitarian roles for men and women rather than the traditional patriarchal roles I had always seen in church and in marriages. Attending these events, I had my first experience hearing women lead in this way and hearing language in worship that used imagery from scripture other than just calling God "Father." During one of the worship times, a woman read

an opening using a scriptural reference about God calling each one of us by name; she called the names of each of us that were there. Hearing my name as one called by God resonated within me and affirmed that I was also called, known and loved by God.

These experiences were pivotal for me. My sense that God created me female for good things was being confirmed. Finally, I met godly women who were modeling what I wanted to become: a woman loved by God, at home with God, empowered to lead people in worship or spiritual teachings, empowered to share the good news.

Since then, it's become clear to me that using language that includes both women and men is a way for women to hear their calling as clearly as men do. When women are left out of the language used in church, it can reinforce powerful negative messages and behaviors they may be receiving in their homes. ♦

**Hearing my name as one called by God resonated within me and affirmed that I was also called, known and loved by God.**

**"Can you think of an event or story that has motivated you to work against and think about violence against women? How has that story affected your theology as a Mennonite?"**

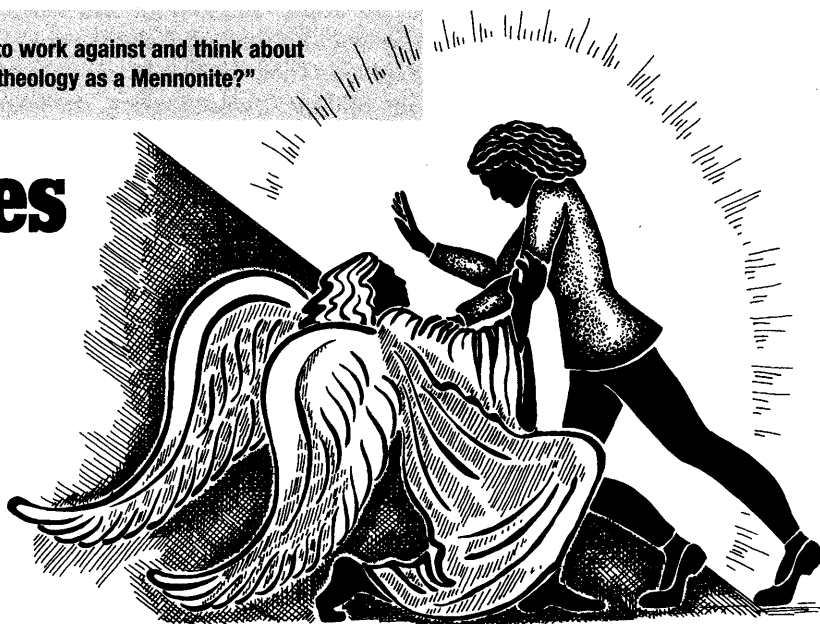
## Too many stories

by Kathy Lawrence

Dear Carol,

Your question, "has there been an event or story that has motivated you to work against and think about violence against women," brings *many* memories to mind. The memories begin in childhood, when I first saw the pornographic magazines that some of my friends' father's kept—thinking that something was not quite right—and years later when I realized that pornography was part of a multi-billion dollar business that oppressed and violated many, especially women and children. There were fun and loving memories of a favorite uncle, whom I later found out had taunted and abused my aunt and cousins. I remember being ill prepared to deal with the depth of my disbelief and

confusion, and experiencing guilt for not seeing the pain of my beloved aunt and cousins. I also remember being ensnared by a deep-seated anger that created a rift so wide that I wasn't able to talk with my uncle before his untimely death to cancer. And there are memories of another cousin's story. Her first husband viciously



Kathy Lawrence grew up in the Baptist church but moved to the Mennonite church in the early 1990s because of its pacifist stance. Kathy is a member of Toronto United Mennonite Church. She remains committed—in her vocation as a psychologist, her spirituality and through her church community—to working against violence, especially violence against women and children.

and repeatedly beat her and her oldest child. I remember being amazed at her courage to leave and the faithfulness of her friends who risked their own lives to help her.

Unfortunately, there are many events and stories. There are too many to count, and so many that I can't just pick one as the event or story that was pivotal! There are

stories of my own, of beloved family and friends, and of many clients that I have been honored to work with. There have been times of feeling totally overwhelmed. But, I have learned how to “wrestle with the angels” until blessings and hope are released over the darkness and despair.

Excuse me. I've got to get going. I see another angel coming. ♦

**“Can you think of an event or story that has motivated you to work against and think about violence against women? How has that story affected your theology as a Mennonite?”**

## Just Pray

**The author chooses to remain anonymous.**

**Being beaten by your husband is still a tragedy, a systemic horrible tragedy, and I don't see the church being very worried about it, or even admitting that it happens.**

Dear Carol,

When I was 25 years old, my mother told me something about my father I hadn't known. She said that when he was very angry, he used to hit her and storm out of the house. She told me that when he left she would be so angry she felt she would explode. Then she would pray about it. She told me it was amazing, the anger just left her, and when he came home she was ready to forgive him. “Prayer is an amazing thing,” she told me. “You should try that if something like that ever happens to you.”

I remember my parents' fights, the shouting late at night, but unconsciously I had blocked out the physical violence. When she told me about the violence, my memory came back crystal clear—the sounds of chairs being knocked over, scuffling and banging, her low words, “Don't you dare hit me again,” his cursing, the slam of the front door. My mother's behavior was a direct product of the Mennonite culture she grew up in—women should behave, absorb, not complain, and pray.

How is my life different from my mother's? If my husband abused me, I would still pray, but I would not submit to violence. Society has changed, thank God. If I needed to leave my husband

because of violence, there's a women's shelter within five miles of my home where my children and I could go. I would not be blamed there, and people would help me with the material and psychological difficulties I would face.

But is anything different in the church? I know someone who left her husband because she was being beaten. Everyone in the church tried to get her to return because they believed her husband was such a good guy. They blamed her for provoking his rages, which they saw as aberrations to his good character. People in the church were suspicious of the shelter she was at. They thought she was being brainwashed. They blamed her because she was afraid to meet with him, afraid to move back home. She was told that it wasn't Christian to be suspicious.

Being beaten by your husband is still a tragedy, a systemic horrible tragedy, and I don't see the church being very concerned about it, or even admitting that it happens. How can we be developing a theology about something that we don't talk about? When was the last time you heard anyone pray for women who have been abused by the people they live with?

An Anabaptist theology opposing violence against women sounds like a good idea, but I don't see much evidence of it in most churches I've seen. ♦



# BIBLIOGRAPHY

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This is one of the few books that examines how people who have been sexual offenders are treated in the church. Yantzi reflects on his work with people who have offended. He is very sensitive to the concerns of survivors of sexual abuse, and gives realistic and practical advice to churches as they strive to be communities of healing and hope. It is a well-written resource.

Nason-Clark, Nancy. *The Battered Wife: How Christians Confront Family Violence*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

Nason-Clark is a sociologist who has conducted extensive research on Canadian evangelical church communities and their responses to victims of domestic abuse. This book examines how clergy specifically, and churches in general, are responding to women who are abused. The strength of this book is that these are not just observations by the author but reflections on statistical evidence from rigorous research.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. BasicBooks, 1992.

While this book is not written from a Christian perspective, it remains one of the most valuable books on violence

against women. Herman contextualizes abuse within the spectrum of violence that people face, and she examines how trauma changes peoples lives. It is a fascinating read.

Adams, Carol J. and Marie M. Fortune, editors. *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*. Continuum International, 1995.

This is an invaluable compilation of articles gathered from many different sources. This book, which includes biblical, ethical, historical and pastoral sections, provides an excellent overview of different theological perspectives on violence against women.

*Journal of Religion and Abuse*. This new academic journal, put out quarterly by the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, addresses the issue of violence from a religious perspective. You can order this journal by going to the Center's website at [www.cpsdv.org](http://www.cpsdv.org).

*Working Together* is a quarterly journal of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. Writing from a religious perspective, past issues have looked at topics such as clergy sexual abuse, child abuse and domestic violence. You can access this through the website [www.cpsdv.org](http://www.cpsdv.org)

On June 12, a five-judge appeals chamber upheld the convictions of Dragoljub Kunarac, Radomir Kovac, and Zoran Vukovic for violations of the laws or customs of war and **crimes against humanity**. The cases against the men were based on their torture, rape and enslavement of civilian Muslim women over the course of their military activities in Bosnia from April 1992 through February 1993.

In the annual **World Refugee Day** statement on June 20, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Ruud Lubbers, noted that women and their children make up the vast majority of the world's nearly 20 million refugees. To highlight its concern for refugee women, UNHCR and partners have issued a new handbook meant to guide decision-makers, including UNHCR staff, in carrying out refugee status determination.

## Women in leadership

**Carolyn Lyndaker** was licensed on August 11 as pastor of Crest Hill Community Church in Wardensville, West Virginia. She co-pastors with her husband Milford.

**Seferina DeLeon** was installed April 28 to pastoral ministry at Iglesia del Buen Pastor, Goshen, Indiana.

**Bonita Stutzman** was ordained March 31 as chaplain at Rockingham Memorial Hospital, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

**Ruth Johnston**, Minneapolis, Minnesota, was ordained for chaplaincy on June 23 by Central Plains Mennonite Conference.

**Rebecca Linsenmeyer** was ordained to serve as a chaplain in prison ministry at the Glenon Heights Mennonite Church in Lakewood, Colorado on August 4.

**Naomi Engle** began a pastoral assignment at Aurora Mennonite Church, Aurora, Ohio, on June 30. She works with her husband Jess.

**Sharon Wyse Miller** was licensed as conference mission minister of Central Plains Mennonite Conference on June 16.



continued on page 16



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## **WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT**

### **Looking Forward**

#### **JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2003**

Looking back:  
Former Women's  
Concerns' staff

#### **MARCH-APRIL 2003**

Healing from and  
preventing abuse:  
MCC's work

#### **MAY-JUNE 2003**

Women in Columbia

#### **JULY-AUGUST**

Women's roles and how  
they've changed

On June 26-30, 22 women from 14 countries, representing different churches and women's organizations, came together in Cartigny, Switzerland, to address **concerns of women in European Churches** and societies. A special focus was on the Europe-wide problem of violence against women. Another pressing issue discussed was the problem of trafficking in women related to the massive increase of poverty in Central and Eastern Europe.

To provide concrete guidance to those engaged in activities to end violence against women, the National Advisory Council on Violence Against Women has developed the **Toolkit To End Violence Against Women**. It is available at [toolkit.ncjrs.org](http://toolkit.ncjrs.org).

The work of one of western Canada's longest serving women's social charities has now come to an end. The **Gretna First Mennonite Mission Ladies Aid** started in the early 1890s when a group of women gathered to raise funds for the local church school and overseas missions. In their early years of operation, the women were able to help furnish the school library with 1,000 books as well as a new piano. Other beneficiaries of their work included an orphanage in India and a girls home in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Through a collaboration between MCC and the Center of Anabaptist Resources in Latin America (CLARA) in Bogota, Columbus, **Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Families** by Carolyn Holderread Heggen has been translated into Spanish. Contact [clara@inter.net.co](mailto:clara@inter.net.co) to order a copy of the book. It costs about \$13 U.S. and can be shipped from CLARA's Miami warehouse. ♦